

In the name of God, and of God's Son, and of God's Holy Spirit. Amen.

“As we work together with Christ, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,

‘At an acceptable time I have listened to you,  
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.’”

These words of Paul in his letter to the community at Corinth seem to pick up on a theme we touched on last Sunday. Last Sunday, we read the parable of the farmer, sowing and tending a crop of grain; and we considered how God expects us to play our part in the work of renewing the world. God does not intend to accomplish this alone; we are co-workers with God in building up the new.

Paul tells the Corinthians, do not receive God's grace to no purpose; in working with Christ and with this community, do not be fruitless. God has listened to our suffering; God has seen our lostness; and God has made today, now, the day that God redeems that suffering, and puts us on a path of finding ourselves and each other. Paul is defending his ministry to this

community at Corinth; other people have come after Paul and caused the Corinthians to doubt Paul's teaching and Paul's calling as an apostle. Paul tells them how the outcome of his adversity has been the fruit of the Spirit; Paul tells them that even though others have treated him as a sorrowful, unknown impostor, he has remained true to who God has called him to be; and remaining true to who God has called him to be is a greater possession than anything else, and a source of constant joy.

I'm going to speculate a little here and say that I can imagine Paul, the good, scripture-loving Pharisee, has made his share of laments. I can imagine that, even when he was persecuting the church, he was wailing to God about what he saw as heresy; I can imagine that after being struck blind on his way to Damascus, that as he fasted and prayed, some of that prayer was crying out to God in sorrow over his own misguidedness; I can imagine Paul crying out to God, "When will this blindness end?" And at this acceptable time, God listened; and God sent someone to help Paul, and Paul's journey continued in a direction he never could have predicted.

We often tell ourselves when we pray that God already knows what difficulties we have in our lives; but part of building, growing, and being in

relationship with God and with ourselves is actually speaking those difficulties out loud; part of our spiritual growth and connection with God is lamenting our adversities and lamenting our own faults. Each of us, in our lives, is in a boat; and yes, Jesus is in that boat with us; but to work with Christ, to not receive God's grace in a fruitless way, sometimes we need to reach inward, to go to the part of our life's boat and shake Jesus and lament, demand, why are you sleeping?! Do you see what is going on?! Do you care?! What are we going to do about it? What are WE going to do about it? Because the disciples in the boat in today's Gospel reading did not just stand back and wait; they were bailing out this boat, they were fighting the wind, and yes, maybe they could have awakened Jesus a little sooner, but they did awaken him; and they worked together with Christ. And the fully awakened Jesus within their boat made the storm still.

Paul speaks of rejoicing in sorrow; having nothing but possessing everything; and by the power of God enduring afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger so that those afflictions yield the Spiritual fruits of purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, and truthful speech. Paul is speaking about finding a sense of stillness in the storm. The

hardships do end for Paul; but neither does God leave Paul, and God's presence is greater than those hardships, so much so that the middle of a storm can feel like a flat calm.

Job has raised his lament to God. Job is NOT patient, no matter what the old adage says. Job does not silently submit to his suffering; Job argues and complains and wrestles with God about the unearned suffering Job is experiencing, and the unearned suffering Job sees around him. God listens; and God answers Job out of that whirlwind and tells Job that God is more than what Job had understood God to be. Job had understood that if he did the right things, made the right sacrifices, gave the right amount to charity, that God would bless him in return. God tells Job that their relationship is not a series of transactions; it is a deeper knowledge of one another, a deeper knowledge that allows Job to perceive God's reality, God's presence, deep within his heart; and that deep knowledge of God brings Job to a place of stillness, of peace within the storm that has taken over his life. After this incredible encounter with God, Job says to God, "I know you can do all things, and nothing you wish is impossible. I have spoken of the unspeakable, and tried to grasp the infinite. I had heard of

you with my ears; but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust.” (Stephen Mitchell, tr.)

“We have spoken frankly to you... our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return-- I speak as to children-- open wide your hearts also.” These words of Paul close our reading of his letter today; but they could be spoken by God Godself. God speaks to us and God’s heart is wide open to us. There is no restriction in God’s affections towards us. But God asks us to open wide our hearts to God, just as God’s heart is open wide to us. That means we speak to God of our joys and our anxieties; we cry out to God in songs of gladness, praise, and lament; we turn inward in the boat of our selves, the boat of our lives, because Jesus is there and as fellow children of God we are blessed to be able to shake Jesus awake and say, Look what’s going on! What are WE going to do about it? And Jesus will work with us, so that even in the midst of storm, we can find calm.

Now is the acceptable time to listen and to speak to God; now is the time to open wide our hearts for God to dwell deep within. Make time today to learn of God’s stillness amid the storm; make quiet, still space for God to sit

and speak; make space for yourself to speak to God about all that is ordinary and extraordinary in your life. And so dive ever deeper into relationship, growing deeper into the healing of God's knowing you and you knowing God. Amen.